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C.I.A. Revises Estimate, Sees Soviet As Oil-Independent Through 80's

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WASHINGTON, May 18 — In a move with potential ramifications for American foreign policy, the Central Intelligence Agency has increased its estimates of Soviet oil production, an agency spokesman said today. It now says that during the 1980's Moscow will still be able to meet its energy needs without having to import petroleum, according to Administration officials.

The officials said today that a new C.I.A. study states that, contrary to previous agency estimates, the Russians will not be competing for Middle Eastern or other foreign sources of oil by 1985. The

study has already been discussed with Western allies, the officials said.

Beginning in 1977, the C.I.A. had predicted that Soviet oil production would start declining by 1980 and that by 1985 the Russians would have to import as much as 3.5 million barrels a day for their needs. The C.I.A. now says that estimate will not be borne out, the officials said. The revision is attributed to increased Soviet investment in oil production.

World's Largest Producer

The C.I.A. projection is important because, following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, officials from the Carter Administration and later the Reagan Administrations cited the Soviet "need" to import oil as a rationale for the Soviet moves to bring troops closer to the Persian Gulf.

The Soviet Union has reported that its oil production, in fact, has gradually risen and is now about 12.1 million barrels a day, making it the largest producer of petroleum in the world. Saudi Arabia is second and the United States third. The Russians remain net exporters of oil.

Until the latest estimate, the C.I.A. had predicted that by 1985 a Russian decline

would have led them to produce no more than 8 million to 10 million barrels a day. Now, a C.I.A. spokesman said today, the agency estimates that by 1985 the Soviet Union will produce 10 million to 11 million barrels a day. In addition, with Soviet natural gas production rising, there seems to be no need for Soviet energy imports by then, officials said.

Some State Department officials said that the C.I.A. estimate for 1985 of 10 million to 11 million barrels may prove to be underestimates. The Russians' own projection of oil production in the current five-year plan is 12.4 million to 12.9 million barrels a day by 1985.

Two months ago, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, in justifying the Administration's case for increasing the American military presence in the Persian Gulf area, said that region "is and will be the fulcrum of contention for the foreseeable future."

"The Soviet Union will almost certainly become a net energy importer," he said. "This, coupled with their economic necessity for eventual access to the Gulf oil basis, is their long-range objective of denying access to oil by the West."

Marshall I. Goldman, associate director of the Russian Research Center at Harvard, said today that James Noren, a C.I.A. analyst, discussed the latest Soviet oil projections at a seminar at the center last week.

'Not Desperate for Petroleum'

Mr. Goldman, who had been sharply critical of the earlier C.I.A. estimates, said that the new projection "means first of all that we should at least allow for the fact that the Soviets are not desperate for petroleum."

"So far, we have been conducting our foreign policy on a worst-case scenario," Mr. Goldman said. "The estimates that have been governing policy have been proven wrong so far. It doesn't mean that the Soviets are now benevolent in the Middle East, but those who think the Russians must go into the Middle East for oil are wrong."

Mr. Noren, in his discussion at Harvard, attributed the new, higher projection to forecasts based on increased Soviet investment in oil production. He also said that the Russians were putting increased stress on conservation and that they plan to raise their wholesale prices next year, the first time this has been done since 1967.